

RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Quarterly

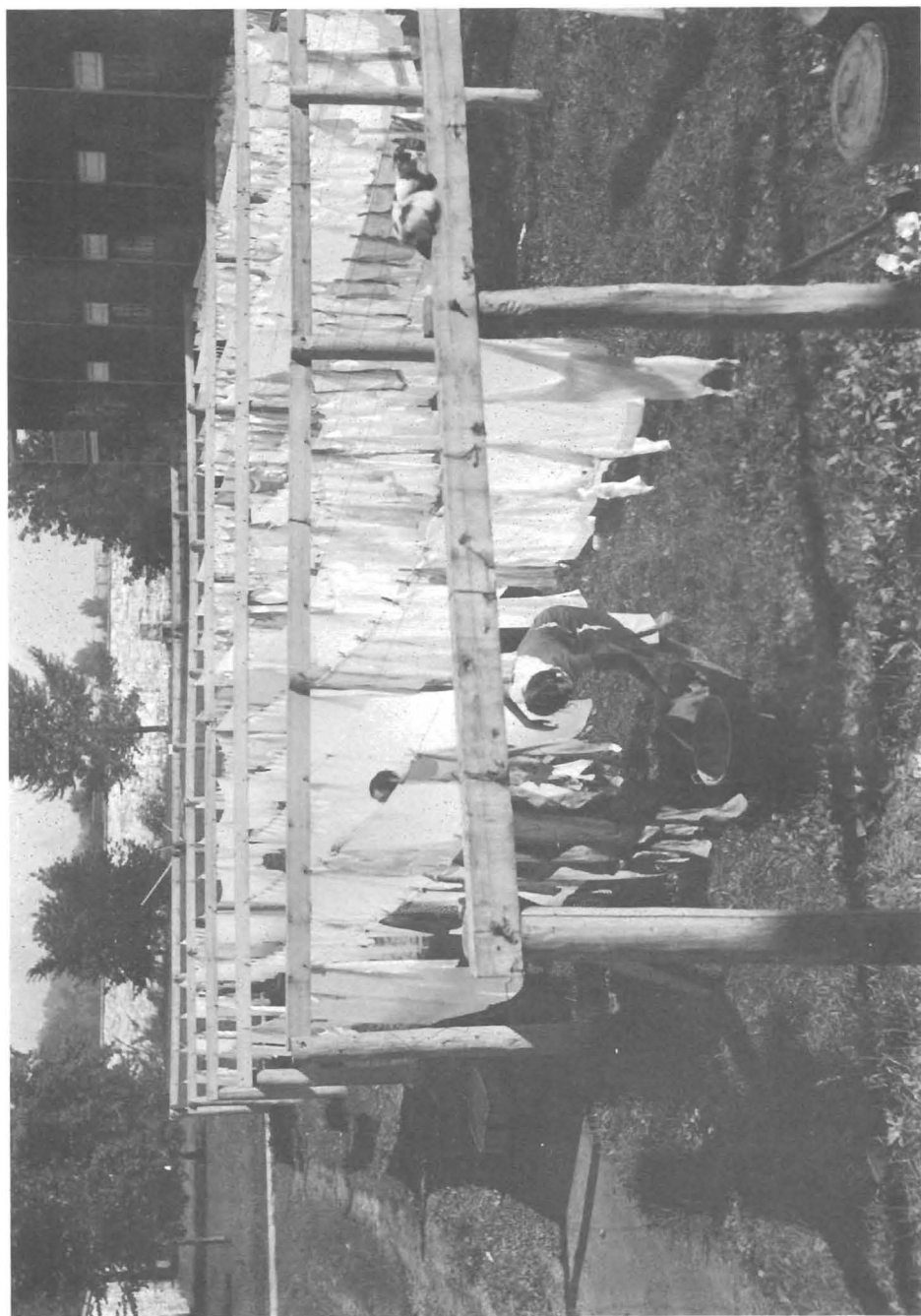
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RIVERSIDE WOMEN'S REFORMATORY



Old House of Correction, built in 1876, which in 1921 was refurbished and became the Riverside Women's Reformatory



The many, many clothes lines at Riverside.

Women's Prison — 1930s

All that's left of the women's prison
is a few photographs, a high, brick-faced
granite wall, three steps to the street,
and a marble walk that ends in grass.
As I drive past each week, I think of the women
sentenced to live there. What were
their crimes: Child-murder, robbery,
prostitution — would they be criminals now?

The laundry where they worked
was light, high-ceilinged. Pots of clothes
simmered like soup on the stove.
Sleeves rolled to the elbow, one woman
helps another hold sheets taut
through the mangle. A third turns
the crank, braided head circled in steam.

I imagine a prisoner who irons
for customers from town often holds
a silk blouse to her shoulders,
or measures a child's dress with her eyes.
Once in a while, someone rips a sheet
in half, someone screams, another stands
like a waxwork as the smell of scorched
cloth rises from a half-ironed blouse.

Though the street door isn't locked —
this is a "model prison" — no one
unlatches it. One prisoner pulls a sheet
from the pile where they've drifted;
another takes the opposite end. They snap
the sheet smooth, step together folding,
flipping, making a square in mid-air.

The steam that fills the room
washes away memories as it smooths
skin. Bare wood floors. Babies. Back
of a man's hand. Salesmen's jokes.
Shoes with cardboard soles. Hair curls
in the dampness; faces are flushed,
even smiling, over the work.

In the windy, sunlit yard, sheets
flap on the line like the wings
of large, tired birds, maybe snowgeese
headed south. Gathering the sheets in
in baskets, the women carry them
inside, where they rest — masses
of white feathers, gaining strength,
as the women do, for the next long flight.

From *Cloud Train* by Joan Aleshire; copyright 1982; Texas Tech University

RIVERSIDE WOMEN'S REFORMATORY

BY LORRAINE EATON

The history surrounding the Riverside Reformatory (1921-1970) is fascinating. The old house of correction was a typical, old style prison structure with cells, heavy bars, and painted windows. It was built in 1876 and in 1919 the house was formally closed. All the men and women had been transferred to the state prison at Windsor.

On the west side of the prison a high brick-faced granite wall, built in 1898, still stands as a sentinel. But the wall can also be remembered as a warm comforting arm around an unusual home. And what made this home unusual? The clothes line, for one thing—not just one or two lines, but line after line—oh, the dailyness of filling all those lines with clean white clothes, which become so fresh smelling after sun and wind have dried them. The filled clothes lines were a poignant visual picture of one of the activities at this unusual home.

The sounds one would hear behind this giant wall: perhaps a group of young women, on a warm summer day, just returning from a picnic at Lake Bomoseen, happily singing as they came back home; or, on a cold winter's evening, perhaps a small group singing together while others read; or maybe at Christmas time, a sing-a-long during a community Christmas party for young children, youngsters from backgrounds not unlike their own in many cases.

For two years the house of correction was empty of human involvement and assumed an air of neglect. To many Vermonters (especially those living in the Rutland area) it came as a surprise in 1921 when: "The Legislature voted to return the women prisoners of the state from Windsor to Rutland, to the forbidding old House of Correction which stood with its stone floors, cells, heavy bars, opaque windows, and general dreariness as a monument to the older idea of prisons."

In 1921 Lena Ross had been a first grade teacher for 25 years. For a quarter of a century she taught little children, problem children (both rich and poor). She saw many of the homes from which criminals and paupers usually emerge, but unlike a professional social worker she saw many, many more which produce healthy, satisfactory well balanced men and women, productive citizens.

Judge John E. Weeks (1853-1948)¹ of Middlebury, then director of state institutions, was the humanitarian who began unfolding this narrative of love. The foresight of this man in choosing Lena Ross as the woman to take charge of this place is exemplified by the question he posed to her during the interview, "Lena, wouldn't you like to scrape the gray paint off those windows and let the women see the mountains?"

The Legislature of 1923 had, by an appropriation, made it possible to remodel or build anew. This is where the foresight of Miss Ross came into shining view. Not only did not the paint come off the windows, but a solid cell block became a dining room. With its concrete hewed away, blue and white curtains were hung at the win-

¹Governor of Vermont (1927-1931); House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. (1931-1933)



*Recreation—
A day at Lake Bomoseen*

*Lena Ross had a friend who allowed the girls
the use of a cottage at the lake.*



dows. Small tables, seating four, filled the room. Pictures of ocean and river, childhood and motherhood were hung on the walls.

Another cell block became the chapel. It was into this room, particularly, that Miss Ross was to bring an air of freedom: windows with side casements, fully open, allowing both summer breeze and radiance to enter. It was in this room that she ran into problems with the builders, but her intuition was stronger than their contrariness. She wanted to bring the horizon indoors and she did. "Isn't perhaps an eager sense of form and proportion a vital thing for one who means to help rebuild human nature into a comelier form?"

The bedrooms were bright, wholesome, clean, showing each girl's individuality by the arrangement — not cells, not dark, not musty — instead made inviting with a snowy, smooth counterpane, a vase of flowers in front of a photograph, a keepsake or two . . .

The kitchen, with one of the outside doors open to the afternoon sun, led into a court with a lattice fence. This same kitchen was where one of the Riverside girls, as Lena Ross affectionately called them,² had a birthday. Her friends made her a birthday cake. Riverside even had a wedding breakfast. Banquets, too, were served to the Rutland Women's Club and the Rutland Rotary Club.

A large recreation room was where the girls could gather to sew, read, listen to the radio, dance, and play games. The piano there was a gift of Miss Emily Proctor (1869-1948), daughter of Redfield Proctor (1831-1908). The book shelves were filled with books, given by individuals, Trinity Parish, and a number bought with money which had been contributed.

"I wanted to give them some real womanized work which could be competently handled," said Miss Ross "without expensive equipment and supervision. I thought," she said "of laundry work. No, I didn't advertise or anything. I just told some of my friends if they'd send us their laundry we'd do it. Some people I realized might be afraid to send their belongings here. They might be afraid something might be stolen. But Rutland people didn't seem to be afraid."

Accordingly, the laundry room came to be: the wash room and the ironing room, one above the other. And yes, they, too, were airy, light, and cool, with generous windows all along the side.

But Miss Ross had created more than a laundry room, more than "real womanized work." The income from the laundry room was to grow so substantial that it paid, almost completely, all the expenses involved with running Riverside. The girls were paid a bonus monthly and Miss Ross, always trying to instill good habits, required each girl to lay aside a dollar a month for her "discharge money." The laundry work, the saving, Miss Ross said "builds up healthy pride, and workmanlike responsibility and social solidarity."

One virtue of the laundry work is especially interesting. Riverside did not send for and deliver clothes. They were brought by the families who wanted their laundry done by the girls at Riverside. That meant a casual coming and going, in and out of the laundry room, of wholesome, decent human beings. The community became involved. They came to know the girls the way they knew anybody who would work for them. That simple contact was worth a great deal, part of the human atmosphere needed by the girls.

Lena Ross certainly made history in Rutland with transforming the old house of corrections into Riverside. A story in the 9 July 1933 **Boston Post** newspaper had this for a headline: "No Bars in this Women's Prison, Supt. Lena Ross Gives Golden

²The ages of the female prisoners varied, but not to Lena Ross . . . and to Helen Koltonski. They were referred to in a positive way as the "girls."

Rule . . . Homey Atmosphere Permeates Vermont Institution." The physical changes she brought created just what she had in mind in the very beginning: "to approach home conditions as far as possible."

Riverside was to become more than a well remodeled physical plant for women prisoners. Lena Ross had a beautifully simple, age-old philosophy of how these women were to be treated. "I treat them the way I'd like to be treated myself if I had to come to a place like this." This one woman, full of passionate feeling, wanted to share herself with these women of the street, brought to Riverside for a variety of reasons: selling bootleg whiskey, illicit trade in drugs, counterfeiting, adultery, stealing, prostitution, murder.

Her first procedure to help a prisoner was to put the girl into the prison hospital for a fortnight, and here the hospital door was locked. Each girl received a thorough medical examination and bed rest, if necessary. The matrons and the other girls were in and out of the room, making the girl welcome, helping her to get settled. The other girls knew just what to say to the new prisoner. All this attention to a prisoner in a reformatory. Many found this experience a new facet of their lives. Miss Ross felt that each body should be physically healthy before trying to help in other ways: mentally, morally, and especially, spiritually.

For many of the girls this was the first time in their lives they experienced some of the simple joys of life: a clean body, a warm bed at night, nourishing food, good recreation. To quote Miss Ross, "They're like everybody else. Most of what they learn they learn from the people around them. Human contacts are as necessary for moral health as air and light and food, and one of the perversest things about prison tradition is that so much energy and money and thought are expended in keeping from the inmates what would do them the most good."

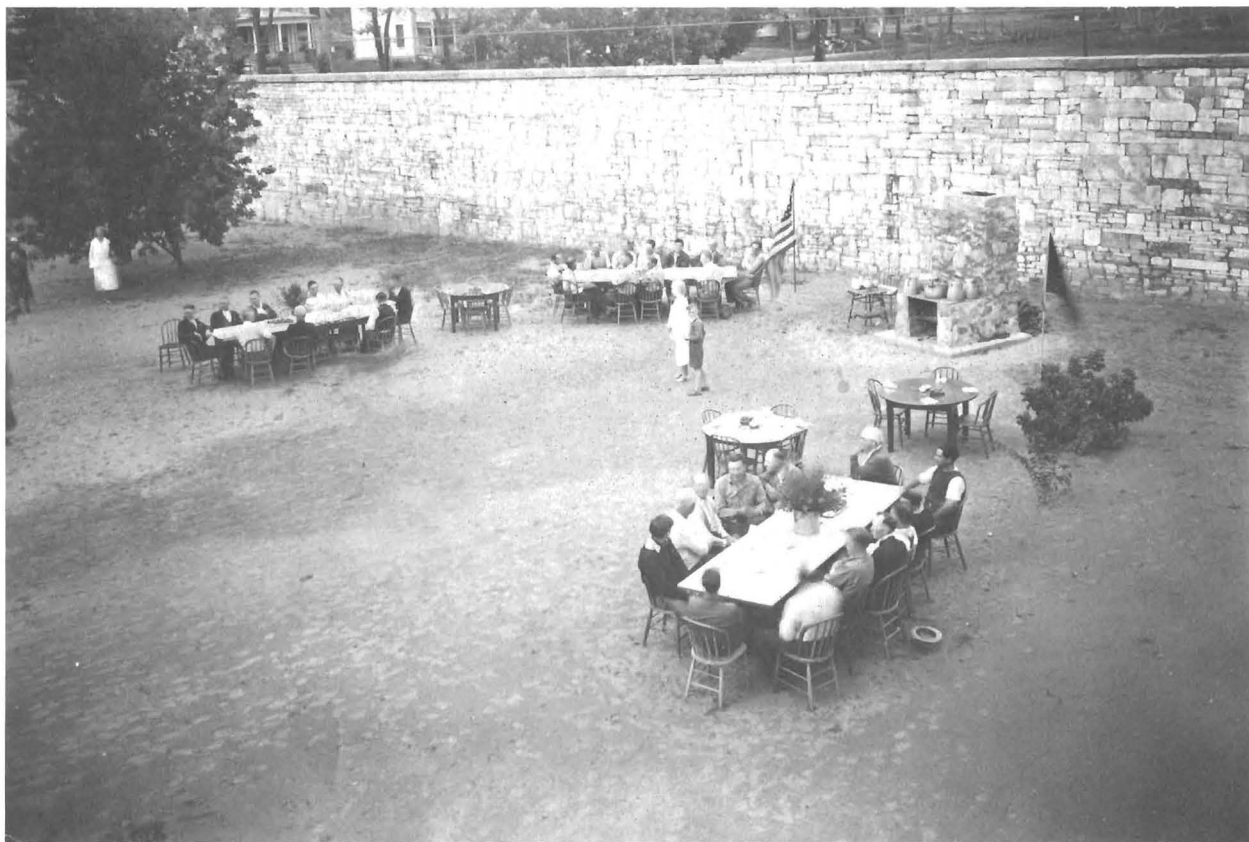
The aim of Riverside Reformatory was to create a constructive rehabilitative program. Miss Ross began with basics of a healthy body and the importance of human relationships. She knew that even more was necessary. She believed they should be given the opportunity to gain some valuable knowledge, experience, and ideals. Lena Ross, perhaps, unconsciously, was providing food for their minds, as well as for their bodies.

The population of Riverside was usually small and allowed each girl to discuss her problems and seek advice. Miss Ross realized that each girl had her own particular problems and her own particular individuality and that she should be treated as an individual. But the institutional program was not the complete answer for rehabilitation. Miss Ross strongly felt that society must do its part, also. Society has to receive her back into the community and she must be given a chance.

Miss Ross had faith in humans, both the inmates and the people who made up the outside community. Again, she held to such a simple philosophy: creating humanizing conditions which in turn foster human ideals. The inmate coming in with a broken past and then being released, with a different attitude towards society, has a better understanding of her responsibility to her family, to society, to herself . . . released with a healthy mind and body. Did it work? Less than six percent of the girls were repeaters. Could strong spiritual faith in human beings create such a change in these girls?

Lena Ross, two weeks before she died, called Helen Koltonski, her assistant, to her bedside and said: "Fame is nothing. Power is nothing. But love and sympathetic understanding of your fellow men is everything. I'm old and I'm broken. I've given my life for the girls. When you see them this morning give them my love."

Lena Ross died on 25 May 1936. And such a legacy she left. Within that granite wall, built so long ago, love for human dignity was born and each day was made stronger because of Lena Ross.



September 26, 1935. This was the old yard which was full of earlier foundations, cleaned up by V.E.R.A. and WPA. Lena Ross, the staff and women of Riverside gave the men a dinner on this date as a little mark of appreciation. Note the fine outside fireplace.



A Christmas dinner given by the "Helping Hands of Riverside". The children were invited by the churches, Sisters of the Convent of St. Joseph, and the schools.

How fortunate for both the staff and the prisoners at Riverside that her assistant, Miss Koltonski, believed in the girls just as Miss Ross did. "Upon learning of Miss Koltonski's appointment as superintendent, the inmates of the reformatory gave her a serenade Saturday, horns being tooted and pans pounded".³

Helen Koltonski was born in Rutland 20 October 1892, daughter of Jacques A. and Jennie (Kammer) Koltonski. She attended Rutland High School, graduating in 1911. It was then located at the site of the present city fire station (which today is named for her brother, former Fire Chief Alfred H. Koltonski (1894-1977).

Her apprenticeship with Lena Ross was a strong foundation on which she put her own unique mark. Yes, she still treated the inmates as unfortunate individuals needing help, rather than as wrongdoers. The operation of the reformatory was an enormous responsibility: creating a friendly atmosphere, providing useful chores for the occupants, chores which would not only give them daily work but also instill qualities in them to want to improve their attitudes toward life. It was a demanding job to make this institution a home to help the girls become better human beings.

She was very aware of our social structure which presented many difficulties for legal offenders to return to a normal, law-abiding existence. She was fully aware of the importance of training in home arts; and more importantly, how a prudent, but kindly treatment played a part in developing stable characters in women who would eventually return to society.

The list of all the goodness, all the kindness, that was evident during her role as head of Riverside is endless. Such a variety of correspondence in her files. From Friends of Prisoners, Inc. in Boston 1940, for instance, came this accolade:

Please accept our sincere thanks for your kindness in coming to speak at our annual meeting. I found myself quite envying your girls! It would be a grand thing if all our institutions could be run on such a happy basis.

The following is part of a letter Helen Koltonski received from the Elizabeth Lund Home in Burlington in December 1946.

We are certainly surprised to receive and open the package of lovely stuffed animals for our babies. We wonder if these were made by your girls. If so, we hope you will read this letter to them so that they will realize how much these articles mean to us. We wish they might see some of the babies as they hold and play with the toys.

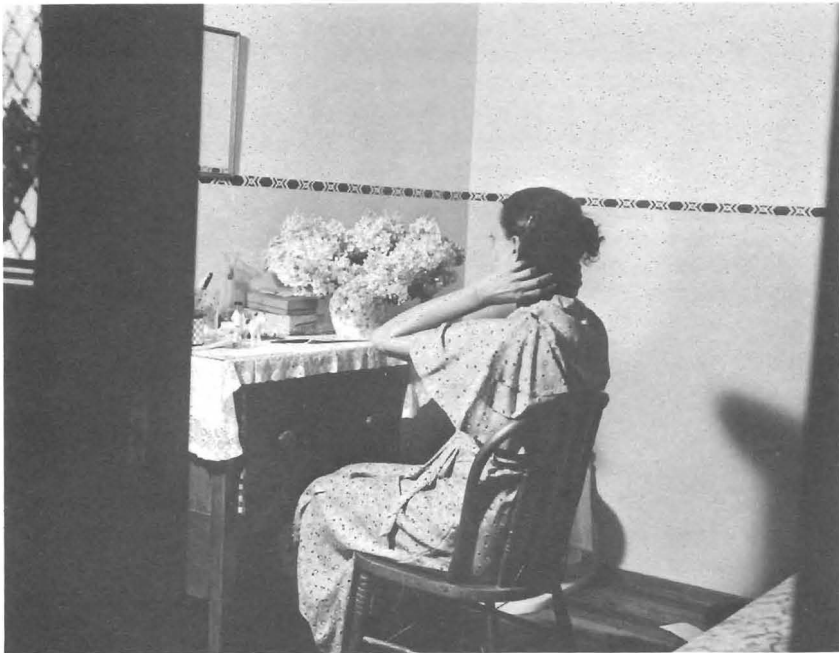
In 1950, for instance, the warden at the State Prison in Concord, New Hampshire wrote:

Some time in the not too distant future, I would like to visit your Institution and talk with you. During the past few weeks, I have heard some very fine things about you and the modern methods employed in your institution.

³Rutland Herald, circa June 1936



Helen Koltonski and her girls enjoy singing around one of the three pianos at Riverside.



One of the girls in her bedroom, perhaps primping for a special occasion. Note the lovely hydrangea.

In the December 1955 issue of **Catholic Charities Review**, Mary E. McKeogh of Burlington wrote of Helen Koltonski and her spirituality with reference to the Christopher's slogan, "It's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness." Mary McKeogh tells of the carol singing rehearsals in preparation for the bus ride throughout the community on Christmas Eve. The best in these incarcerated women was brought out as they baked individual fruitcakes during Advent for gift-giving; filled fancy flower pots with plants they had rooted from slips and wrapped boxes for the girls' near ones.

The spirit of Christmas came truly alive, McKeogh's commentary on Koltonski continues, when the girls would board the bus with accordions and a variety of gifts. First stop, the City Farm. The girls were, indeed, as excited as the residents, for they were not only bringing gifts and carols, but also a part of themselves, to share with these old people. The bus would then go on to the Sunset Home, the Loretto Home, a few stops by request for shut-ins and, lastly, to the home of the mayor.

What a beautiful tradition for a public institution of correction to establish. And what a gift of love sharing to instill in the hearts of these young women. Just imagine what it must have been like to hear one of the inmates say, years later, no longer at Riverside, "We celebrated Christmas in the most beautiful manner."

In 1959 Walter Vincent, a senior Dartmouth student, did a research paper on juvenile delinquency. Part of that research was done at Riverside and he wrote Miss Koltonski about his experience:

Looking back over my four years spent here at Dartmouth, I consider my visits with you folks as one of the highlights of my educational career. When I left you Friday afternoon, I was truly inspired that there are such persons as yourself left in this world. Here at school, we seem to come in contact with most of the world's problems rather than being exposed to a balancing mood factor. We hear about the tough life that awaits us in the "cold, cruel world," and tend to look backward rather than ahead, for the past seems to be the foundation of a happiness upon which we must face a gloomy future. I no longer feel such is true, and if I can do as much good for my fellow man as you have done for yours, I will certainly consider my life a success.

Many other letters from former inmates were very personal, and poignant. "I often think how foolish I was and how much further ahead we might have been, had I behaved differently. Though I know I am a better wife and a mother now, than I was before my punishment. And I do believe that people do forgive even if they don't forget."

Another young inmate wrote, "Miss Kay you'll never know how grateful I've been and always will be for having been under your charge. You were very understanding and I could always go to you and talk things out if they were troubling me."

On 2 February 1962, upon hearing of her retirement, Senator George D. Aiken in Washington wrote:

I just can't believe that you are retiring and I don't see how the State of Vermont can ever replace you—and it won't. No one can ever properly assess what you have done to help the women who needed it, but the fact remains that there are many more people who have now become good citizens because of your guidance and patience.

Helen Koltonski turned 70 in October 1962 and under the mandatory retirement program, she had to retire. A **Rutland Herald** news story stated: "She has held firm to the belief, sound judgment, common sense, and understanding of the female offender and her problems are more effective tools of rehabilitation than are prison bars, walls, and rigid restrictions."

During her 26 years as superintendent of Riverside "Miss K," as she was fondly called by the hundreds of inmates who were helped by her, continued in her own way in the rehabilitation of women prisoners. The roots established by Miss Ross were lasting and that simple philosophy of nurturing love was to flourish.

Life at Riverside continued for five more years. There were at least two new superintendents during that time and many changes were made in how the reformatory was operated. The average number of prisoners continued to drop. The State Buildings Board voted on 8 October 1966 to close the reformatory, and the 1967 Legislature concurred with the plan.

On 23 June 1967 a **Rutland Herald** reporter summarized the 89 years of the prison building. In reading the objective news article it is difficult not to be nostalgic about all the love that Lena Ross and Helen Koltonski contributed to Riverside. How would they have felt to walk through the building for the last time, to check the empty cells, to remove records and equipment? A paragraph from the article reads: "A small plaster-of-paris plaque, perhaps made many years ago by an inmate, which hangs in the reformatory chapel, will be stored away with other antiquities. The plaque proclaims 'prayer changes things'."

Patricia Koltonski Iverson, daughter of former fire chief Koltonski, related that a plaque just like that one now hangs in the bedroom of her aunt, Pauline Koltonski Emery, who at 91, still resides at her home on Baxter Street.

The building, that was used as the Rutland County Jail for Women until 1970, is no longer there. At that time the Vermont Department of Corrections gave some thought to making the staff house at Riverside into a youth rehabilitation center. That plan never materialized, however, and the correction officials gave permission for the building to be torn down.

On 1 October 1970 the excavator began the demolition with the garage in back of the main buildings. The **Rutland Herald** mentioned "the sale of fixtures from all the buildings on the reformatory grounds . . . the sale of doors, windows, tubs, toilets and other fixtures went 'very well'." On 5 October 1970 the demolition of the main building, Riverside, began.

Riverside Reformatory no longer exists and yet it still lives. That fine, brick-faced granite wall stands triumphantly. No one can tear down or take away the memories which were played out in the big yard which it encircles. Historically, Riverside is irreplaceable. But it is so important to remember what went on there, behind that great wall, in a supportive and therapeutic atmosphere. Can anyone look at the history of Riverside, and not sense the love that Lena and Helen shared spontaneously with their girls?

Lena Ross expressed her philosophy of concern which can stand as a testimonial to the human values for which Riverside stood and as a credo for present and future Riversides:

People have the strangest ideas about prisons, as if going through the door of one turned a man or woman into a griffin or a werewolf. A prison is nothing but a hospital for mind and soul. It should be

just as useful to any communtiy as its churches and schools and hospitals, and just as much a matter of pride and satisfaction. We talk so much, we Americans, about the sacred, inestimable values of good homelife. If we think it's as fine as that, why not give a little of it to prisoners who mostly never had a single minute of it before being convicted. It's perfectly simple, just imagine that it's your own son or daughter who's got off the right road.⁴



Widely respected as a model prison, administrators from other facilities were always welcome at the Riverside Women's Reformatory in Rutland. Here with Helen Koltonski is one such observer from Germany (circa 1930s).

AUTHOR

Lorraine Eaton lives on Journey's End Road in Mendon. She was born in Des Plaines, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. She and her husband Robert both graduated from Rutland High School in 1947. She has participated in a variety of volunteer activities at the Rutland Correctional Center for many years. She has four adult children.

⁴Words of Lena Ross, from "Miss Lena's Girls" by Sarah Cleghorn and Dorothy Canfield; August 1931; **Survey-Graphic Magazine**

Chapel—A room for inspiration, reflection and hopeful thoughts



RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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